

A bird too far

He discovered the secrets of the shy Jerdon's courser once, but was never to see the bird again

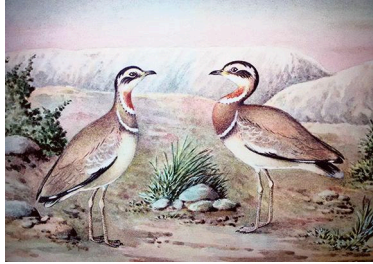
Few people besides birdwatchers knew of Jerdon's courser when P. Jeganathan started his study. Fewer still have seen the creature in the flesh. Ornithologists wrote it off as nearly extinct for almost nine decades before its rediscovery in 1986. The elusive nocturnal bird with long legs and large eyes lives only in the arid jungles of southern Andhra Pradesh.

In 2000, Jeganathan sought the help of Aitanna, a local hunter, who had been instrumental in the re-discovery of the species. They circled a two-kilometre radius in the Sri Lankamalleswara Wildlife Sanctuary in Kadapa. After two hours, the beam of Aitanna's torch fell on a bird the size of a yellow-wattled lapwing. The courser crouched and remained still, becoming another rock on the landscape. Even its eyes didn't reflect the light and give it away.

Hard terrain

If spotting one bird was so time-consuming, how was Jeganathan to conduct a survey? Perhaps looking for footprints would be a better strategy? Nobody had seen its spoor, and the hard terrain wasn't the ideal medium for creating impressions. He laid more than a hundred tracking strips, fine dirt sieved into rectangular plots. Then he set camera traps above these 'soil pads' so he could match photos of creatures to their tracks. Unlike many birds, the Jerdon's courser has only three forward facing toes. After months of laying and relaying the pads and camera traps, the researcher got an imprint. Now he could recognise its footprint anywhere.

Jeganathan expanded his survey to the entire Lankamalai area, laying 400 soil pads, and found three more spots where the courser lived. That gave him a good idea of



Elusive A painting of the bird. SUBBUKA

its preferred habitat. It doesn't like dense thickets nor does it live in open clearings. Instead, it needs a combination of both. Goatherds inadvertently maintain the right conditions for the species by lopping off branches while their animals nibble on saplings.

An unusual cry

No one could identify the call of the Jerdon's courser. Jeganathan recorded an unusual cry that he was fairly certain belonged to it. Since he didn't observe the bird when it called, the other experts weren't convinced. He was at wit's end. The courser bird only emerged after dark, and sat still as a rock when illuminated. What were the chances of watching it while it called?

Several days later, he heard that distinctive sound one afternoon, an odd time for a nocturnal bird. He and his field assistant dropped to their bellies and waited. The caller walked towards them and in plain sight cried again. "Seeing the bird and hearing its call was the happiest moment of my life," says Jeganathan. Then it flew away. "They take off vertically, like helicopters."

That was one of only three or four times in four years he got a good

view of the shy bird. That sighting was a gift but the bird left him a bonus too, pooping before taking off. The stinky dropping was scientific gold. By analysing it, Jeganathan would learn that the Jerdon's courser lived on termites and ants. Even as he pried the bird's secrets one by one, his happiness didn't last. He was never to see a Jerdon's courser again.

Frantic calls

In 2005, he went to Mumbai for a month to write his report. When he returned with a permit to catch and fit radio transmitters on two coursers, the place was unrecognisable. Heavy machinery had cut a swathe through the jungle for an ancillary canal off the main Telugu Ganga project. A parallel canal had flattened potential courser areas in a neighbouring sanctuary. He made frantic calls to forest officials who stopped the work. The Irrigation Department claimed they didn't know they were digging through a reserve. Jeganathan lobbied for re-aligning the channel to skirt the sanctuary. "I became an accidental conservationist," he says. But the damage was done.

In 2008, Jeganathan returned to assess the situation by setting 200 camera traps that took over a lakh photographs. Not one of them was of a Jerdon's courser. But he heard a call once. The canal prevented goatherds from entering the forest. Without them, the area became more wooded and unsuitable for the survival of the species. Since a camera trap snapped a photograph in 2004, the courser hasn't been seen.

But Jeganathan hasn't lost hope. The courser has done a disappearing act once already. Chittoor, Nellore, Anantapur, Prakasam and Kurnool districts have similar habitats, and it may yet show up. Jeganathan says, "You need a lunatic who's ready to be frustrated to find it again."



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Janaki Lenin is not a conservationista but many creatures share her home for reasons she is yet to discover.